

Laughing Through the News: Comedy News and Political Behavior in Young Americans

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### Abstract

Over the past 20 years, comedy news programs such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show* have increasingly become one of the primary sources of political information for young people. This paper seeks to discuss how comedy news affects its viewers' political decision making and rates of information retention. This paper looks at partisan biases associated with the hosts, viewers and content of the shows. It evaluates who watches comedy news and how these viewers differ from similar demographics that do not watch the same programs.

This paper evaluates frames in communications and partisan bias in comedy news and compares them to conventional television news programs. Using data from the American National Election Studies and the National Annenberg Election Survey, this paper looks at voting habits and levels of political engagement among participants who watched different types of news programs. An experiment was conducted as a part of this original research that evaluated opinion forming and information retention effects of comedy and conventional television news. In this survey participants viewed either a comedy news or conventional television news clip on a selection of topics and answered questions about their opinions on the topics they viewed. Participants answered follow up questions after a period of one week to assess their information retention on the topics they viewed.

The findings of this research show that there is a positive relationship between viewership of comedy news and voting rates. Viewers of comedy news are more likely to have opinions that agree with those of the show's host and remember details from the comedy news program. Comedy News is an effective way to communicate political news information and shows just as much news content as conventional television news programs.

### Laughing Through the News: Comedy News and Political Behavior in Young Americans

Comedy news holds a special place in the American political consciousness. For over 40 years, Saturday Night Live has satirized the highest public officials and has been said to impact electoral outcomes (Jones, 2013). A survey of Time magazine readers named Jon Stewart of The Daily Show “America’s Most Trusted News Host” after the death of Walter Cronkite in 2009 (Cohen 2010). As millennials and generation-z turn further away from traditional news sources, comedy news fills an important role in informing viewers about elections, political news and foreign affairs. It drives viewers to learn more about current events and engage with the political process. Comedy news provides a more accessible alternative to political information for Americans with lower levels of education, helping to decrease the knowledge gap that exists in American politics. This paper will evaluate what audiences consume comedy news as a primary source of political information, and the impact this consumption has on their opinion forming and political decision making.

### **Background**

In this essay, the term “comedy news” will be used to refer to shows that use satire and comedy to comment on subjects of the news without overtly being news programs themselves. These shows can serve as a news source, but the primary genre of these shows is comedy, rather than news. A few examples that will be discussed at length are *The Daily Show*, *Saturday Night Live* and its “news” segment *Weekend Update*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Late Night*. These shows use humor and satire to extend past the boundaries of critique and analysis that typically constrain journalists (Abel and Barthel 2013).

The term “soft news” encompasses all comedy news and a wider genre of infotainment, including evening and daily talk shows such as *Entertainment Tonight* and *The Today Show*.

These shows differ from comedy news in the topics they discuss and tools they use to comment on news subjects. In his book *Soft News Goes to War: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy in the New Media Age*, Matthew A. Baum defines soft news by having three characteristics. First, they all focus on soft news topics and themes. Second, their audiences are relatively uninterested in politics. And third, their audiences tune in for the primary goal of entertainment, rather than information (Baum 2005). Most soft news exists on television rather than print or digital formats because this is the format that “can break the attention barrier for issues of low salience” (Baum 2005). The difference in the characteristics of soft news and mainstream television news results in these programs having vastly different audiences. The term “mainstream television news” will be used to refer to all other forms of cable, broadcast and network news programs that follow the traditional model of hard news.

### **Research Question**

This paper will evaluate how comedy news impacts young Americans’ political decision making and information retention. Comedy news uses different frames of communication and primes issues in different ways than conventional television news. The use of framing, priming, communication strategies and bias in comedy news impacts how viewers perceive, process and act upon the information they hear in these programs. This paper seeks to answer how comedy news impacts opinion forming and political decision making in young Americans. This leads to the following research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: How does news format impact opinion forming in young people?

H1: Participants who watched comedy news clips would be more likely to form opinions in line with those of the host’s commentary.

H1a: Self-identified conservative participants who watched conventional television news would be more likely to answer questions in line with conservative beliefs, and those who watched comedy news clips would be more likely to sway from conservative opinions.

RQ2: How does news format impact information retention in young people?

H2: Participants who watched comedy news clips would have better recall of details and the source of the clips they watched.

RQ3: How does news format impact political decision making, evaluated through voting, in young people?

H3: Viewers of comedy news will be more likely to vote than viewers of other television programs.

### **Literature Review**

When defining his own show, former *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart has called his show a “fake news show” and referred to the content as “jokes about the news” (Weber 2014). According to Stewart, the show uses tools such as exaggeration, hyperbole, puns, imitation, and ridicule to discuss news in a way that is easier to cut through the topics. Stewart was quoted in an interview with Rolling Stone saying “Ultimately, I’m judged on whether or not the show is funny,” not on the newsworthiness of the show’s content. Robert N. Spicer, professor and scholar of journalism, says Jon Stewart’s use of “social commentary through comedy” allows him to almost “have it both ways”; it allows him to be the jester and the political actor at the same time (Spicer 2011). Put another way, he has the legitimacy of a political pundit or news anchor without being held to the same accountability. Bryan Williams of *NBC Nightly News* called *The Daily Show*’s type of journalism a “necessary branch of government” (Smith, 2010). Williams

said “Jon [Stewart] has chronicled the death of shame in politics and journalism. “Many of us on this side of the journalism tracks often wish we were on Jon’s side. I envy his platform to shout from the mountaintop.”

*The Daily Show* is highest quality form of comedy news in terms of actual news content. In an episode of *The Daily Show*, the viewer will see a series of news headlines from mainstream television news shows, followed by the host’s commentary on the event. The commentary reveals the nuances of the news that might not be highlighted otherwise. Mainstream journalists are held to a higher standard of objectivity and bound to the perspectives of official sources, making them miss aspects of a story that other sources have the freedom to capture (Abel and Barthel 2014). *The Daily Show*, however, is an exception to the rule in terms of the quality and quantity of its political analysis in comparison to other comedy news shows. *The Daily Show* has been found to include the same amount of substantive political coverage as broadcast news programming (Fox et al 2007). In their analysis of substantive news coverage in *The Daily Show* and network news programs, Fox et al found that where *The Daily Show* spends time on humorous content, network news programs spend time on “hype” content or horserace coverage. Other comedy news programs hold a notable amount of substantive news coverage, but not to the same degree as *The Daily Show* or mainstream news programs, making *The Daily Show* the best example to study for comparing comedy and mainstream television news on format alone.

### **Comedy News Audience**

The main audience of comedy news tends to be young, educated, and liberally leaning people (NAES 2004). Since 2000, the number of young Americans age 18-29 that watch comedy news as a primary source of political information has steadily risen. Pew shows that as young people have turned away from traditional sources for political news, they have increasingly cited

comedy news shows as their primary source for political news. However, these numbers do not show that the people turning away from conventional television news are turning towards comedy news. Feldman and Young show that the viewers of comedy news also increasingly watch conventional television news, and it is more likely that there is a larger group of young people turning away from television news sources entirely. Between the years 2000 and 2004, the number of young people who watched network news decreased by 16 percent, while the number who watched comedy news shows increased by 12 percent (Pew Research Center 2004). Young people are the most likely group to report learning from comedy news shows, and the least likely to report learning from conventional television news shows (Feldman and Young 2008).

The main audience of soft news, or “tabloid television”, is far different from that of comedy news. Information gathered across four Pew surveys found that respondents without a high school diploma reported the most viewership of “tabloid” TV (such as *Hard Copy* and *Inside Edition*) among any education group. This group also viewed daytime television as much as 72% more than any educational group (Baum 2003). Respondents with a college education watch these programs at a much lower frequency than they watch network newscasts when compared to those without a high school diploma, suggesting that soft news programs have a higher chance of shaping the views of less educated Americans (Baum 2003).

### **Comedy News as a Source of Political Information**

For those viewers who are turned off by mainstream television news for a variety of reasons, comedy news can be an alternative that provides important political information in a more appealing way. Baum argues that politically unengaged individuals who view soft news are more likely to pay attention to political issues, especially major foreign policy crises, than



similarly inattentive individuals who do not consume soft news. He writes that “many politically inattentive Americans actively avoid politics and foreign policy, except when covered by their favorite soft news programs” (2005). Individuals who already watch traditional news programs do so for the purpose of learning the day’s events, rather than to be entertained, and have already decided that political information is worth their attention (Baum 2005). Individuals who do not already give attention to political information are most likely to be impacted by including political coverage in soft news programs. By “piggybacking” political information on top of entertainment, these programs give politically unengaged viewers some exposure to news topics (Baum 2005, Feldman and Young 2008). Soft news programs are “in the business of making information highly accessible” (Baum 2003, pg. 180) and easier to understand. When assessing viewers who watch both hard news and soft news/comedy news, Baum argues that it is more likely that the viewer learned the information from the soft news source (2003).

This process also works in a slightly different way. Viewers of comedy news require at least some degree of knowledge about public affairs to understand the shows’ humor (Feldman and Young 2008). Jon Stewart himself has pointed out that “if [kids] came to our show without knowledge, it wouldn’t make any sense to them” (quoted in Feldman and Young 2008). The desire to understand the jokes in late night comedy shows could drive viewers without this knowledge to seek out more information. Feldman and Young furthered Baum’s “gateway” theory and found that exposure to comedy news is associated with higher levels of attention to presidential campaigns in traditional television news (2008).

However, Baum continues to say, “such individuals may receive information in the soft news media that differs substantially, even dramatically, from that presented in more traditional news outlets.” Herein lies the major concern with comedy news: the “reporters” do not have the

same obligation to truth and accuracy as true journalists. Based on various analysis of content in comedy news programs, this is not a serious problem. Even if people get different information in comedy news programs than mainstream television news programs, this does not mean it is bad information. While it will be seen that the content in comedy news is politically biased, the use of mainstream television news clips maintains accuracy and allows hosts to dive deeper into nuanced issues that are not addressed in mainstream television news programming. Often mainstream television news programs even edit down sound bites so significantly that they no longer represent the actual meaning of the original clip. *The Daily Show* has been praised for its treatment of sound bites and its comments on the way mainstream television news programs edit sound bites (Weisman 2011; Baym 2005).

Comedy news, like mainstream television news, has an impact on shaping the opinion of its viewers. Since most people do not come directly in contact with the political process on a daily basis, average people are dependent on media to get political information (Fox et al 2007). Viewers of comedy news believe that these programs fill the function of providing political information, so it is important to evaluate the ways comedy news programs inform viewers and help form opinions. Merely by discussing political topics, comedy news hosts have the power to influence an individual's opinions, attitudes, or political behavior (Baum 2005). Including these topics in their programs primes viewers to believe these are important and newsworthy issues. When comedy news outlets prime and frame issues, they do so in easy to understand terms which is more likely to grab the attention of an average viewer. This, in turn, makes it easier and more likely for them to pay additional attention to information about a news topic, perhaps from a hard news outlet. Additionally, viewership of comedy news increases individuals' exposure to issues of politics and foreign affairs and the likelihood that a given issue will be discussed in

casual conversation without necessarily increasing the public's overall interest in political issues (Baum 2005). The simplifying and initial priming taking place in comedy news coverage "sets up" an individual to learn more and take interest in news topics.

The way that viewers orient themselves towards comedy news is shown to impact how much information they retain from the program. Research on political comedy shows that programs which viewers characterize as comedy will not be processed in the same way as programs that are characterized as more serious news or information (Feldman 2013). Thus, viewers' orientation towards comedy news as entertainment rather than news can impact the way they process the political content in the shows. Mainstream television news is already perceived by viewers as a legitimate political information source, so viewers give greater mental effort and subsequently learn more when watching these programs. Feldman argues that it may be that audiences do not learn as much from comedy news, not because of something inherent about the content of these programs, but because they approach this content as entertainment rather than as serious political information, and thus fail to deploy the cognitive resources necessary for effectively processing and learning from media messages (Feldman 2013). Feldman argues that this is a choice made by viewers whether or not to "turn on" the informational viewing objecting and choose to learn from the program.

In general, the choice to watch comedy news over mainstream television news also does not have a significant impact on viewers' knowledge of political issues. In a 2004 survey from the Pew Research Center, respondents were asked to correctly identify which candidates for president had served as an Army general and former House majority leader (Wesley Clark and Richard Gephardt, respectively). Of respondents who got the majority of their political information from comedy television shows, 11 percent answered both questions correctly, 21

percent answered one question correctly, and 68 percent answered neither question correctly. Respondents who regularly got information from nightly network news answered slightly better: 20 percent answered both questions correctly, 22 percent answered one question correctly, and 58 percent answered neither question correctly (Pew Research Center 2004). In both cases, the majority of respondents were unable to answer either question correctly, pointing to a larger issue with public knowledge and news coverage.

Viewers' perception of the genre (entertainment or news) of the show they are watching can impact how informative the program is for the viewer. While viewers turn to late-night comedy primarily for entertainment (Prior 2003), these shows fill the roles of both "entertainment" and "news". Political media which viewers characterize as entertaining or funny is not processed in the same way that media characterized as news or information. Entertainment is more likely to be viewed as "unserious" and perceived as an "easy" medium that requires less processing effort, whereas viewing political news requires a higher investment of cognitive resources to acquire knowledge (Feldman 2013). Feldman argues that even if a soft news show communicates relevant political information, if audiences characterize the show as predominantly entertainment, they are less likely to engage in the kind of effortful processing that produces political learning (2005). However, this means that the opposite is also true. If viewers turn to comedy news with the mindset that it is a source of news information, they will process the content as such and acquire more knowledge.

Comedy news viewers do, however, believe that they learn new information from these programs. Especially for young people, the content of the jokes, sketches and appearances on these programs is not just a repeat of old information. Respondents of the 2004 Pew survey were asked if they ever learn things that they had not heard before, and 61 percent of respondents age

18-29 said they sometimes learn something new. Nearly half of all respondents said they had learned something new. When discussing candidates and elections, 27% of all respondents under age 30 say they learn from late night and comedy programming that they did not know previously. (Pew Research Center 2004). As Baum argues, the new information viewers learn from soft news leads them to seek out more information from other sources. The learning associated with comedy news also might not be the gaining of information, but rather influence on viewers' attitudes. questionnaires in which comedy news viewers are unable to answer knowledge-based questions about political topics might not fully capture the "learning" happening when these people view comedy news.

Polling in the National Annenberg Election Survey also showed that viewers of late-night comedy programs, especially *The Daily Show*, were more likely to know the issue positions and backgrounds of presidential candidates than people who do not watch late-night comedy (NAES 2004). This is due to the content of comedy news primarily focusing on making fun of these topics. Presidential elections, especially primaries, are one of the times with the most opportunity for learning from comedy news. Feldman and Young note that primaries are the time when the potential for growth in learning, attention, and interest in the campaign is the highest. For this reason, the comedy news genre is well suited to cover elections by having candidates on the shows for interviews, satirizing the electoral process and making fun of candidates' personalities.

In 2011 Stephen Colbert demonstrated the ability of comedy news to educate its viewers about political issues when he created a Super PAC, "Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow" and announced his candidacy for "President of the United States of South Carolina." His goal was to teach viewers about campaign finance laws in a post-Citizens United world through comedy and satire. In a study that tested whether exposure to *The Colbert Report*

influenced knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups, Hardy et al found that viewers of *The Colbert Report* had higher perceived and actual knowledge on these topics than viewers of *CNN*, *MSNBC* or *Fox News* (Hardy et al 2014). They write that this was not a result of more politically knowledgeable individuals seeking out the show, rather the results suggest unique learning effects from viewing the show (Hardy et al 2014). This study proves the ability of comedy to be used as a tool for political education and emphasizes the responsibility comedy news hosts have to their audience.

### **Priming and Framing in Comedy News**

Comedy news has many of the same characteristics as mainstream news programs, especially in relation to the power of television to shape opinion through priming and framing. Priming is the relationship between the order a message is viewed, and the perceived importance assigned to a message from the viewer. There is empirical evidence that suggests when two competing messages are viewed in succession, the first message viewed is more persuasive (Holbert et al 2007). In their study of primacy effects in *The Daily Show*, Holbert et al (2007) found that viewers who do not feel empowered by the political process “become especially attached to the satirical message of *The Daily Show* and what it has to say about national television news” (pg. 34). It was also found that viewing *The Daily Show* led to weaker political gratification associated with mainstream television news and that viewing mainstream television news prior to *The Daily Show* led to lower levels of political gratification associated with *The Daily Show*. *The Daily Show* is made up of satire and criticism of mainstream television news, leading to reduced levels of gratification associated with mainstream television news.

Framing is a concept that comes from sociology, psychology, and communication research (Jones et al 2016). In Political Science, it is used to evaluate communication strategies

used by politicians and news media when organizing and presenting information (Wiesman 2011). Entman describes framing as selecting “some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation”. Framing is a two-way process, between the communicator and the viewer. *Frames in communication* come from the speaker, and are the “the words, images, phrases, and presentation styles that a speaker uses when relaying information to another” (Druckman 2001). *Frames in thought* are the ways people conceptualize an issue, reorient their thinking, or perceive a situation (Druckman 2001).

The frame used in election coverage most often found in network evening TV news coverage of politics is the game—or strategy—frame. This frame interprets presidential campaigns in terms of candidate strategy and the horse race rather than policies and issues (Jones et al, 2016). However, comedy news programs heavily emphasize the “human interest” frame in storytelling (Baum 2005). In campaign coverage, *The Daily Show* uses this frame by highlighting flaws related to candidates’ personality traits, issue positions, political fortunes, and communication efforts (Jones et al, 2016). For this reason, viewers of comedy news are often more informed about candidates’ personalities, backgrounds and issue positions than viewers of mainstream television news (NAES 2004). By spending a significant amount of time focusing on “hype” or “horserace” frames, mainstream television news programs show the same quantity of newsworthy information as comedy news programs.

Soft news and comedy news programs also rely almost exclusively on “episodic” framing, which presents news events as individual “episodes” of history, rather than presenting events in a larger theme of current events (Baum 2003). While there are some negatives to this

type of information presentation, Baum notes that social psychology research has found that people are more likely to pay attention to and recall information presented in an episodic frame than a thematic frame.

A study of framing in different types of news coverage of the 2012 Iowa Caucus and primary election compared how viewers of three different news shows—*ABC World News*, Fox News's *Hannity* and *The Daily Show*—perceived Mitt Romney's likelihood to win the Republican nominee and then the general election. Participants of this study were randomly assigned to a news genre, making all other outside news consumption independent of the experimental treatment and helping to prove causality of the assigned media genre. *Hannity* was selected as the typical conservative talk show genre and *ABC News* was selected as the typical broadcast news show. In all three programs, Romney was presented as the winner of the Iowa Caucus and the frontrunner of the election (Jones et al, 2016). The study found that any of the three treatments had a similar effect on increasing the likelihood of viewers to perceive Romney as the front runner in the election. In coverage of the general election, *ABC News* paid relatively little attention to Romney's chances in the general election; *Hannity* emphasized Romney's strengths in the general election and *The Daily Show* mocked his weaknesses. Those who were assigned to watch *Hannity* and *ABC News* had similar perceptions of Romney's electability when compared to the control group. Those who watched *The Daily Show* had far lower perceptions of Romney's electability when compared to the control group and the viewers of *Hannity* or *ABC News*.

This study found that comedy news (demonstrated by *The Daily Show*) had the same effect on influencing perceptions of viability in primary elections as partisan talk media or broadcast news. The distinctive frames used by different media genres had considerable effects



on perception of the candidate's chances in the general election as well. Comedy news has a significant effect on shaping respondents' opinions in the general election, and the wide variety of media choice allows news consumers to choose the source that will influence their views of elections.

In her analysis of framing in *The Daily Show*, Penina Weisman writes that while scholars attribute a variety of different frames to *The Daily Show*, they all are similar in one way: they are humorous (Weisman 2011). The primary goal of "comedy news", especially the shows analyzed in this study, is to be funny. This does not mean, however, that comedic appeal is the only valuable trait of comedy news programs. The use of a comedic frame allows shows like *The Daily Show* to have the functions that serve the public (Weisman 2011). This gives comedy news hosts the ability to use more serious frames to contrast from other content and show the importance of certain issues (Weisman 2011). When a host uses a serious tone, the audience is alerted that they should deploy the cognitive resources to learn from the program, rather than just view it for entertainment (Feldman 2013).

Framing in the political satire of *Saturday Night Live* is a "gentle" critique of the personalities and behaviors of political actors. Rather than critiquing the powerful for their policies or behaviors as political actors *SNL* critiques political actors on their personality traits such as their verbal and body language (Jones 2013). For this reason, *Saturday Night Live* holds a special role in shaping public memory about political candidates and office holders. For much of the show's history, it has been the only program offering political humor and satire (Jones 2013). Caricaturizing political figures, especially the president, has been a central strategy of *SNL* since Chevy Chase appeared as President Ford in the show's first season. Yet, Jones notes that the creation of Chase's Ford-persona is less of an attempt to accurately portray the president,

but to use his behaviors to construct an individual comedic persona. This strategy makes the content less about its subject matter than it is a narrative strategy “linking comedians to character types that encourage repeated viewing for audience engagement with these characters—as opposed to new scenarios and new characters week after week, as occurs through much of the show’s other content” (Jones, 2013).

### **Bias and Opinion Forming**

*Saturday Night Live* has a significant power to influence public perception of political candidates. As early as President Ford in the show’s first season, *SNL* has been critiquing and making fun of politicians and political candidates. Darrell Hammond's impersonation of Al Gore was so effective that Gore's campaign staff made him watch a tape to see how his eye rolling and sighing was perceived in debates (Kurtz 2008). The parody in *SNL* also leads to more critical commentary from conventional television news hosts. An analysis of conventional television news coverage of an interview between Katie Couric and Sarah Palin in 2008 found that the coverage changed significantly following an *SNL* spoof of the interview. In the original interview, Vice Presidential Nominee Sarah Palin was asked to give examples of McCain’s regulation policies, Supreme Court decisions other than *Roe v. Wade*, and names of newspapers she read on a daily basis and failed to do so. Prior to the *SNL* skit, news coverage of the interview either ignored Palin’s responses or attributed the blame to the McCain campaign as a whole. Following the *SNL* skit, conventional television news hosts “raised more questions and concerns regarding Palin’s qualifications and legitimacy as a candidate” (Abel and Barthel 2013). In this case, the *SNL* skit was used as evidence against Palin and as an official source to critique her. The discussion around Palin and the interview could not have occurred without the parody for proof.

## Experimental Research

### Survey Data

The experimental research discussed in this paper so far demonstrates that comedy news is similar to mainstream television news in terms of the amount of real news content. It also shows that comedy news has the ability to be perceived and viewed as legitimate news information. This research has not, however, addressed the way viewers of comedy news participate in government in the real world.

Baum writes that many sources agree that citizens do not need a great deal of factual knowledge about politics in order to fulfill their basic civic duties, such as voting (Baum 2003). He says that many individuals who know and care little about politics (such as those who tune into comedy news as their primary news source) rely on informational shortcuts and heuristic cues to make political judgements without significantly increasing the amount of factual political knowledge that those individuals know. This brings about the following research question:

R1: How does viewership of comedy news impact the likelihood of a person to be politically active?

Data from the National Annenberg Election Study was used to find correlations between viewership of different television programs and voting rates. Survey respondents were asked which programs they watched regularly (regularly being defined as at least once a month). After the 2008 election, they were asked if they did or did not vote. Of the television programs that were reviewed, *The Daily Show*, *The Tonight Show*, *The Today Show*, *NBC News* and *ABC News* showed a correlation that was significant at the .01 level. The viewers of all of these programs showed a positive correlation with voting, however the soft news programs (*The Tonight Show* and *The Today Show*) had the weakest correlation, followed by the mainstream television news

programs (*NBC* and *ABC News*), and the comedy news program (*The Daily Show*) had the strongest correlation with voting rates among respondents (See Table 1).

While this does not show causation, this correlation shows that on average, viewers of politically oriented comedy news are more likely to vote than viewers of conventional television news. This data does not isolate those people who only watch comedy news or conventional television news. Rather, it shows that overall people who consume comedy news have a higher tendency to vote than those who do not. This data also shows the news consumption and voting behaviors of people in the real world, rather than under experimental conditions. It does not take into consideration their actual levels of political knowledge, but shows a statistically significant correlation between viewership of different types of news programs and actual voting rates. The effect that soft news and comedy news programs have on their viewers' political attitudes is able to influence their voting habits without necessarily impacting their factual knowledge of political issues (Baum 2003).

Table 1. Voting Correlations

		Voted 2008
The Daily Show	Pearson Correlation	0.056**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.01
	N	17430
The Tonight Show	Pearson Correlation	0.043**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.01
	N	17430
The Today Show	Pearson Correlation	.040**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.01
	N	17430
NBC News	Pearson Correlation	0.049**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.01
	N	17430
ABC News	Pearson Correlation	0.048**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<0.01
	N	17430

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

### Primary Research Collection

#### Sample

Students in an Intro to American Government class at the University of Missouri were given the opportunity to participate in the survey over the course of two weeks. At the beginning

of the survey, they were given the link to the survey and shown video clips in class. They were not required to participate, but were encouraged to put away their devices, watch the clips and answer the survey questions. A total of 307 students completed the survey. The participants were grouped in two sections, based on their class section, with 166 and 141 students in each group, respectively. Random assignment based on class section and treatment in the controlled environment helps to prove causality of the media genre on any responses (Jones et al, 2016). Participants ranged from age 17 to 26, with the majority being between 18-21 years old. Participants were 59.25% female and 39.81% male and were evenly distributed across political identities.

### **Methodology**

Participants watched four news clips about the following topics: the February 16, 2001 military air strike on Iraqi military base, the 2011 decision to allow Saudi Arabian women to vote, the 2018 UN Climate Report and President Bush's 2004 Economic Summit/Social Security plan. These topics were selected from the available clips from the soft news shows over a range of topics (military, international affairs, human rights, environment and economic) and years, and for their length and ability to be understood out of context of the current events. The goal was to find clips that were old enough that students age 18-22 would not have a preconceived opinion on the topic but included subjects that made sense out of context without any required explanation from the surveyor. Each group watched conventional television news coverage of the topic, from *CBS News*, *ABC News* or *NBC News*, or watched comedy news coverage from *Saturday Night Live* or *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. After watching the news clips, respondents were asked questions about their opinions on the topics and one week later were asked follow-up questions about their memory of the clips they watched.

## Results

Respondents were asked whether they believed there was movement towards democracy, not movement towards democracy or democratic backslide in Saudi Arabia, in response to the clip about the 2011 decision to allow women to vote. Survey group A watched a news clip from *The Daily Show* and survey group B watched a news clip from *NBC News*. Both clips announced that women would be allowed to vote, that the decision would not go into effect until 2015 and that women in Saudi Arabia were also still not allowed to drive. In the comedy news clip from *The Daily Show*, Stewart points out ironies and issues with the headline in ways that NBC does not. As noted by Abel and Barthel, hosts of comedy news are not held to the same standard of objectivity as conventional television news hosts. Stewart emphasizes the irony that the decision that was characterized as an expansion of democracy was a royal decree with the joke “nothing says democracy like a royal decree.” He also points out the political and economic relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia, making a joke about the importance of Saudi Arabian oil in the alliance with the United States. Stewart orders news clips and comments in a way that discredits the headline in a way that the NBC report does not, even though the NBC report includes most of the same details. Stewart uses clips from a variety of conventional television news sources, including *CNN*, *ABC* and *Fox News*, to bring legitimacy to his coverage while also critiquing the coverage by conventional television news sources.

When asked about both democracy and women’s rights in Saudi Arabia, there was a statistically significant relationship between which news program respondents watched and how they answered. The relationship with beliefs about democracy in Saudi Arabia was the strongest. Of the respondents who watched the clip from *The Daily Show*, 27.11 percent believed that there was movement towards democracy and 63.25 percent believed there was not movement towards

democracy (see figure 1). Of those who watched the clip from *NBC News*, however, 52.48 percent believed that there was movement towards democracy and 34.75 percent believed there was not movement towards democracy (see figure 2).

When asked about movement towards women's rights in Saudi Arabia, responses are more subtle, but still very similar. The responses from those who watched the comedy news clip dramatically align with the commentary provided by Stewart, whereas those who watched the clip from *NBC News* are more evenly distributed between opinions. When asked about opinions on movement towards women's rights in Saudi Arabia, results were nearly the same, with over 60 percent of respondents who viewed *The Daily Show* believing that there was not movement towards women's rights in Saudi Arabia (see figure 3.) Of those who viewed *NBC News*, 73 percent believed there was movement towards women's rights (see figure 4.)

It is likely that the strongest correlation was seen on this topic as a result of pre-existing understanding of the topic of the clip. As will be seen with the following topics, some of the topics were likely too far out of context for college students to understand, such as the Bush economic conference or the air strike on an Iraqi military base. Women's rights and democracy, while deeply nuanced topics, can be more easily broken down into a binary opinion based on the information presented.

There was a subtle but statistically significant relationship between viewing comedy news and information retention about the news clip. In the follow up survey, respondents were asked "what did the Saudi Arabian king decree in 2011?" 66.3 percent of respondents who viewed the comedy news clip answered the question correctly and 54.4 percent of respondents who viewed the conventional television news clip answered correctly (see figure 5).



Figure 1.  
Comedy News - Saudi Arabian Democracy

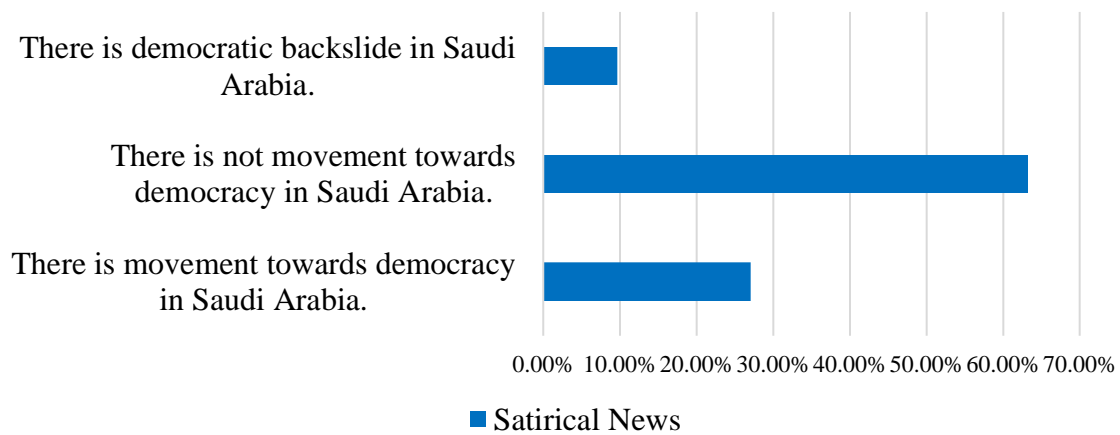


Figure 2.  
Conventional Television News - Saudi Arabian Democracy

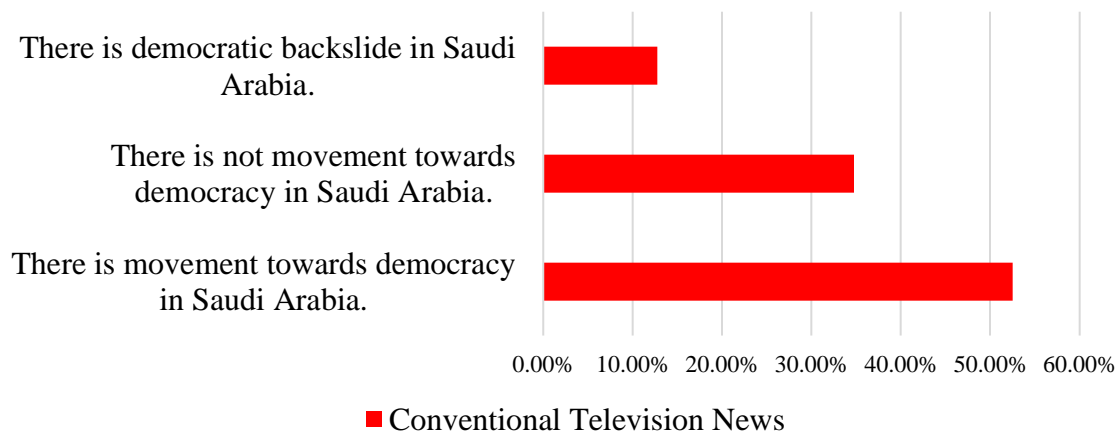


Table 1.  
Saudi Arabian Democracy

Response	Comedy News	Conventional Television News
There is movement towards democracy in Saudi Arabia.	27.11%	52.48%
There is not movement towards democracy in Saudi Arabia.	63.25%	34.75%
There is democratic backslide in Saudi Arabia.	9.64%	12.77%
Total	100%	100%

Table 2.  
Chi-Squared Test

P-Value	< 0.00001
Effect Size (Cramér's V)	0.289
Sample Size	307

Figure 3.  
Comedy News – Saudi Arabian Women's Rights

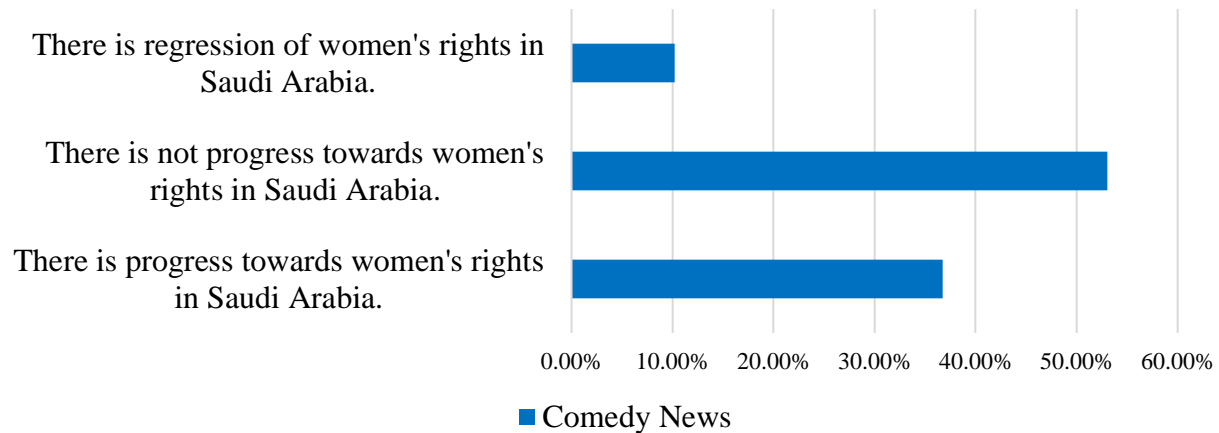


Figure 4.  
Conventional Television News - Saudi Arabian Women's Rights

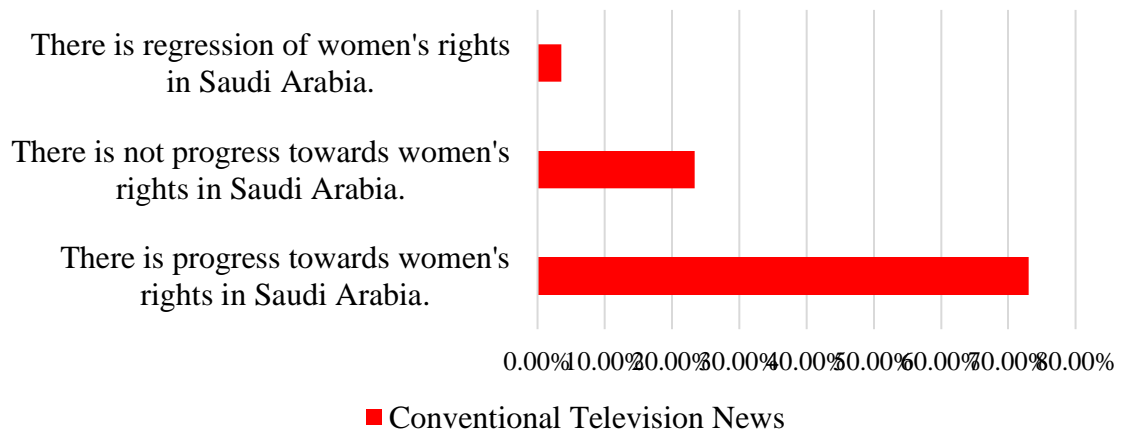


Table 3.  
Comedy News – Saudi Arabian Women’s Rights

Response	Comedy News	Conventional Television News
There is progress towards women's rights in Saudi Arabia.	36.75%	73.05%
There is not progress towards women's rights in Saudi Arabia.	53.01%	23.40%
There is regression of women's rights in Saudi Arabia.	10.24%	3.55%
Total	100%	100%

Table 4.  
Chi-Squared Tests

P-Value	< 0.00001
Effect Size (Cramér’s V)	0.363
Sample Size	307

Figure 5.  
Information Retention – Saudi Arabian Democracy  
“What did the Saudi Arabian king decree in 2011?”

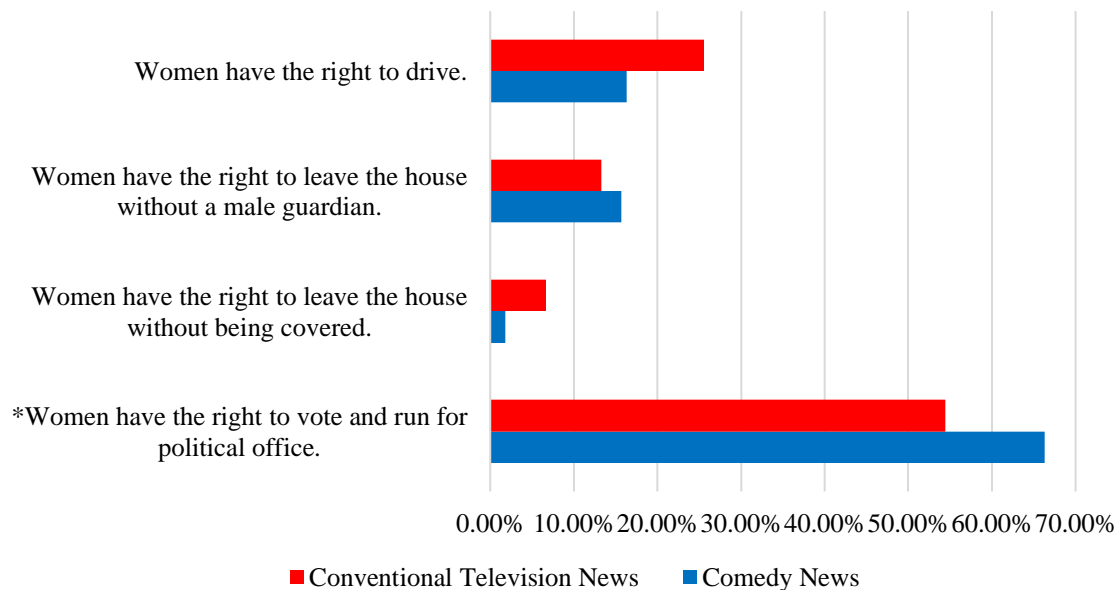


Table 5.  
Information Retention – Saudi Arabian Democracy  
“What did the Saudi Arabian king decree in 2011?”

	Comedy News	Conventional Television News
*Women have the right to vote and run for political office.	66.3%	54.4%
Women have the right to leave the house without being covered.	1.8%	6.7%
Women have the right to leave the house without a male guardian.	15.7%	13.3%
Women have the right to drive.	16.3%	25.6%
Total	100%	100%

\*Denotes correct answer

Table 6.  
Chi-Squared Tests

P-Value	0.0121
Effect Size (Cramér's V)	0.174
Sample Size	361

Respondents were asked whether they thought deficit spending was an economic concern, neither good nor bad for the economy, or helped the economy. Survey group A watched a clip from *CBS News* and survey group B watched a clip from *The Daily Show*. The clip from *CBS News* discussed an economic conference held by President Bush about Social Security and the President's tax plan and ended by noting that current tax cuts “add \$1 trillion to the national debt with no plan in place to pay for them.” The report showed a detailed on-screen graphic and explanation of Social Security and predictions for the future of Social Security. This report emphasized that the ratio of people paying into and receiving benefits from Social Security was declining. The clip from *The Daily Show* emphasized the large national deficit, making the point that the deficit was a bad thing, and commented on the state of Social Security and President

Bush's plan to privatize it by saying "if we don't destroy it now it might be there when we're older."

Respondents who viewed the clip from *The Daily Show* were substantially more likely to answer that they believed that deficit spending was an economic concern, even though both news clips had comments on the harms of deficit spending. Of those who watched *The Daily Show*, 72 percent believed that deficit spending was an economic concern (see figure 5), and 53 percent of respondents who viewed *CBS News* answered the same way (see figure 6). Respondents who watched the clip from *CBS* were more likely to support increasing taxes for Social Security "because it helps the elderly who need support" than respondents who watched *The Daily Show* (see figure 7 and 8), with 5 percent more respondents answering that way. Both groups had equal responses for support of increased taxes or privatization of Social Security. The *CBS* clip primed viewers to believe that current workers would not receive benefits by the time they retired, while the *Daily Show* clip primed viewers to believe that no matter what the President did, Social Security would fail. Even though there was only one sentence regarding Social Security in the clip from *The Daily Show*, it was easy to understand the message Stewart was portraying: Social Security will fail within our lifetime. The survey responses reflect this.

In the follow up survey, respondents were asked if President Bush believed it was necessary to address Social Security immediately, or could the problem wait. There is a subtle but statistically significant relationship between the news clip viewed and the response. Of the respondents who viewed the comedy news clip, 52.3 percent answered that President Bush "thought the problem could wait" (see table 11). Of the respondents who viewed the conventional television news clip, 60.2 percent answered that President Bush "thought the

problem needed to be addressed now” (see table 11). These responses align with the way each host described President Bush’s response to Social Security.

Figure 6.  
Comedy News – Deficit Spending

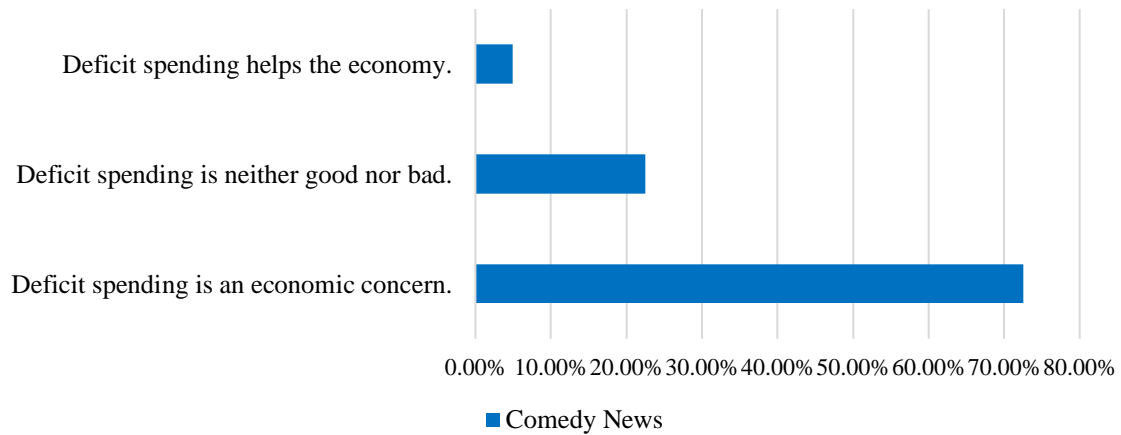


Figure 7.  
Conventional Television News – Deficit Spending

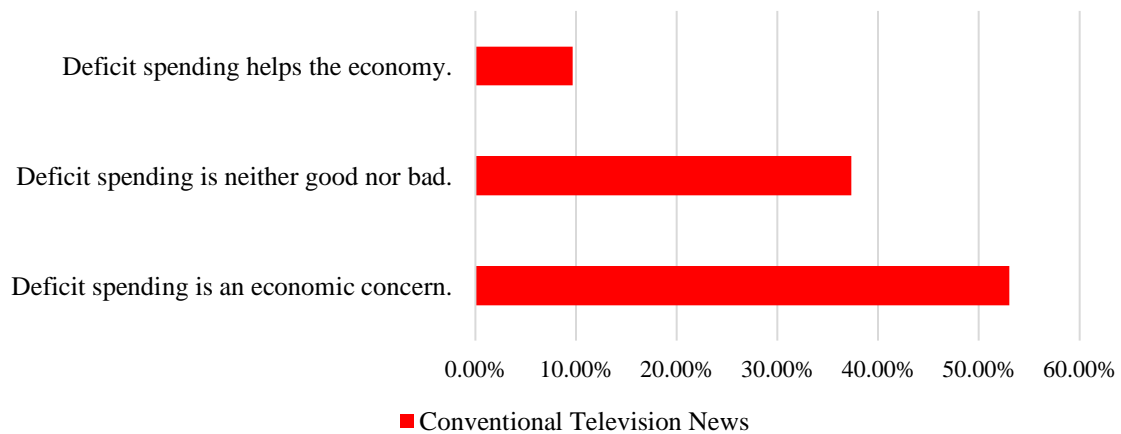


Table 7.  
Comedy News – Deficit Spending

Response	Comedy News	Conventional Television News
Deficit spending is an economic concern.	72.54%	53.01%
Deficit spending is neither good nor bad.	22.54%	37.35%
Deficit spending helps the economy.	4.92%	9.64%
Total	100%	100%

Table 8.  
Chi-Squared Tests

P-Value	0.00195
Effect Size (Cramér's V)	0.201
Sample Size	308

Figure 8.  
Comedy News – Social Security

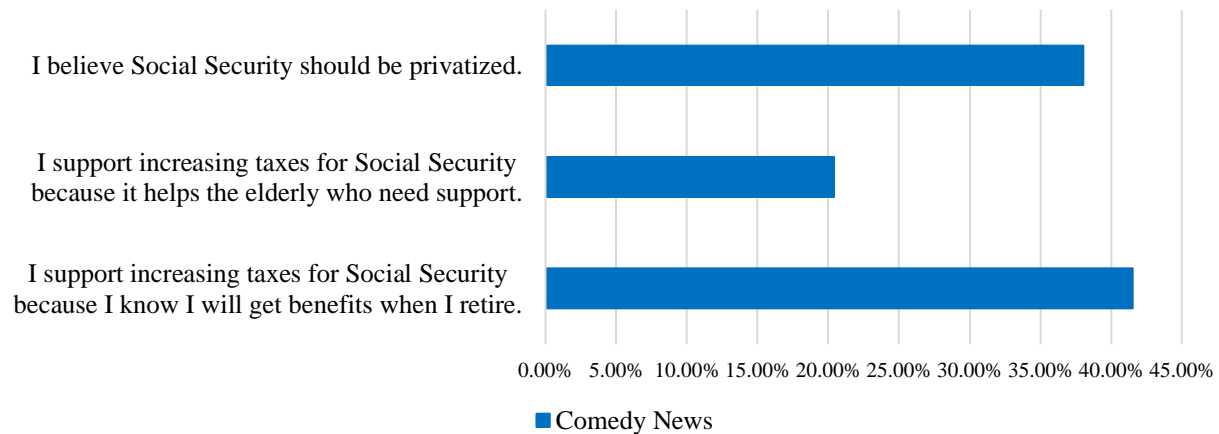


Figure 9.  
Conventional Television News – Social Security

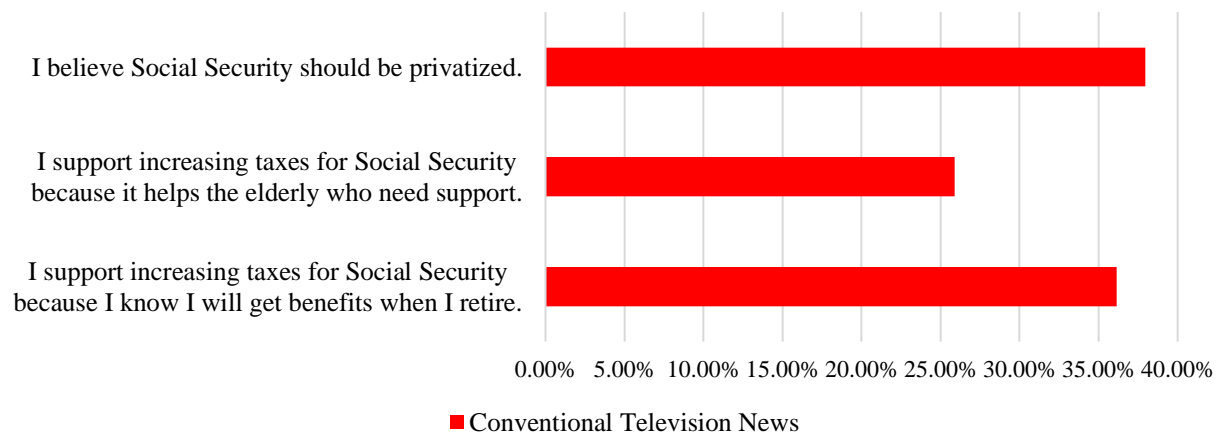


Table 9.  
Comedy News – Social Security

Responses	Comedy News	Conventional Television News
I support increasing taxes for Social Security because I know I will get benefits when I retire.	41.55%	36.14%
I support increasing taxes for Social Security because it helps the elderly who need support.	20.42%	25.90%
I believe Social Security should be privatized.	38.03%	37.95%
Total	100%	100%

Table 10.  
Chi-Squared Test

P-Value	0.458
Effect Size (Cramér's V)	0.0712
Sample Size	308



Table 11.  
Information Retention – Social Security  
“Did President Bush believe it was necessary to address Social Security immediately, or could the problem wait?”

	Comedy News	Conventional Television News
Problem could wait	52.3%	39.8%
Addressed immediately	47.7%	60.2%
Total	100%	100%

Table 12.  
Chi-Squared Test

P-Value	0.0199
Effect Size (Cramér’s V)	0.125
Sample Size	361

An example in which responses to both the comedy news clip and conventional television news clip had no statistically significant relationship is the clips regarding climate change. The comedy news clip that was shown was a clip from Saturday Night Live’s Weekend Update in which hosts Colin Jost and Michael Che announced the United Nations “basically published an obituary for the Earth”, showing a graphic that said, “catastrophic climate change by 2030.” The rest of the clip did not spend a significant amount of time on substantive news coverage. The clip focused on jokes about why individuals do not care enough to do anything to prevent climate change. The conventional television news clip for this selection was a 27 second selection from *ABC News*. This clip entirely focused on the news headline, saying that climate scientists warned that by 2030 (12 years from the air date of the clip) climate change would be irreversible and the effects would be catastrophic.

While there was no statistically significant relationship between the opinion questions and type of news on this topic, there was a subtle but statistically significant relationship in regard to information retention. Respondents who viewed the clip from *ABC News* were more likely to be able to correctly identify the year by which the United Nations warned climate change would be irreversible. *ABC News* verbally reported the information in the news headline, whereas *Weekend Update* showed this information as text on screen while making jokes about it. It is possible that the experimental conditions impacted the outcome of this question in ways that would not occur with people watching news in their organic life. Many participants might not have been looking at the screen and only taking in information verbally.

Figure 10.  
Comedy News – Climate Change

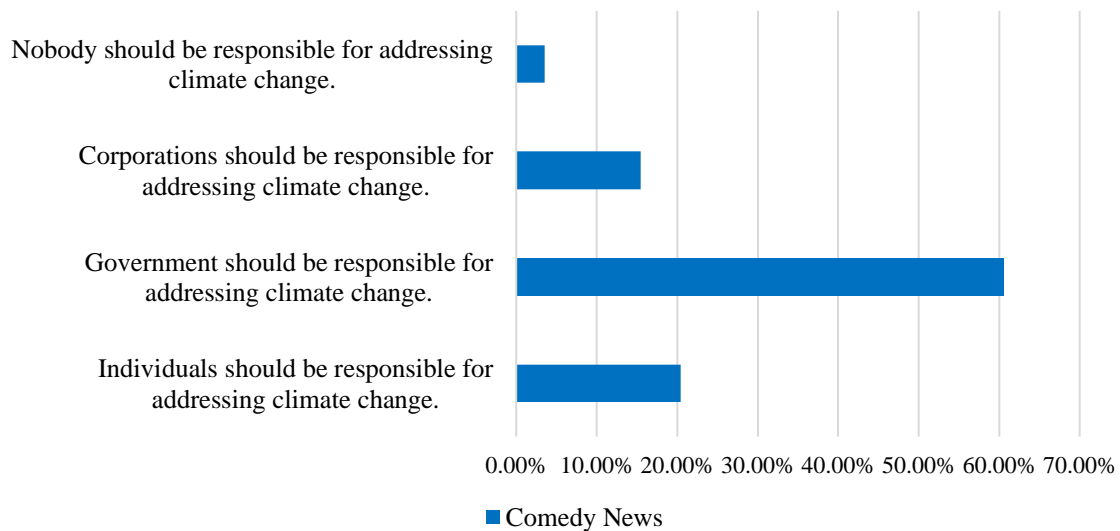


Figure 11.  
Conventional Television News – Climate Change

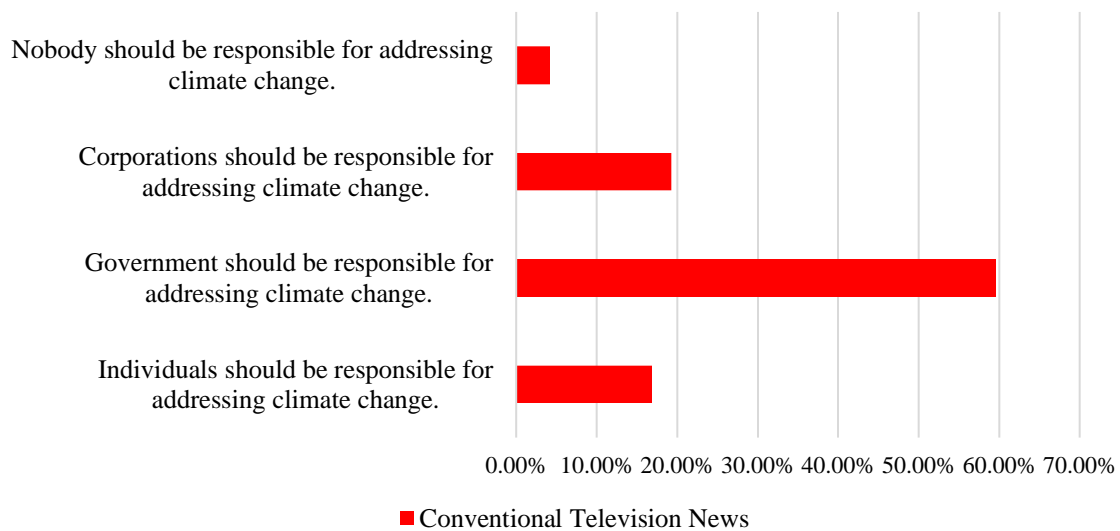


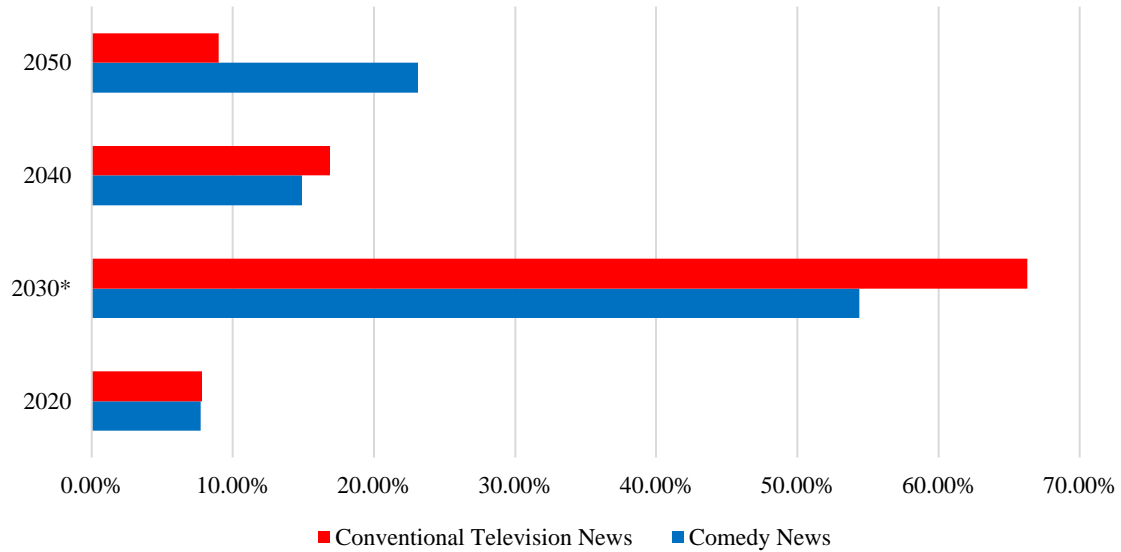
Table 13.  
Comedy News – Climate Change

Response	Comedy News	Conventional Television News
Individuals should be responsible for addressing climate change.	20.42%	16.87%
Government should be responsible for addressing climate change.	60.56%	59.64%
Corporations should be responsible for addressing climate change.	15.49%	19.28%
Nobody should be responsible for addressing climate change.	3.52%	4.22%
Total	100%	100%

Table 14.  
Chi-Squared Test

P-Value	0.740
Effect Size (Cramér's V)	0.0638
Sample Size	308

Figure 12.  
Information Retention - Climate Change  
"By what year did the United Nations report say climate change  
effects would be irreversible?"



\*Denotes correct response

Table 13.  
Information Retention – Climate Change  
"By what year did the United Nations report say  
climate change effects would be irreversible?"

Response	Comedy News	Conventional Television News
2020	7.70%	7.80%
2030*	54.40%	66.30%
2040	14.90%	16.90%
2050	23.10%	9.00%

## Conclusions

Both conventional television news and comedy news programs have significant power of priming and framing. Hosts of comedy news programs have the ability to directly address every nuanced issue of a news topic because they are not held to the same standards of objectivity in

their coverage as conventional television news hosts. This allows them to be direct with their bias and explain their positions on issues, making viewers more likely to agree with the opinions of the host. When comparing opinions of viewers who watched comedy news to those who watched conventional television news coverage on the same topic, it can be observed that comedy news viewers had a strong tendency to cite agreeing with the host's opinions.

Comedy news has the potential to be an excellent source of political information, under the correct conditions. The way that viewers orient themselves towards the show (that is, believing it is entertainment verses information) has an impact on the amount of information they learn from the show (Feldman 2013). Looking at survey data, viewers of *The Daily Show* have higher rates of political knowledge and voting than viewers of other forms of comedy news or conventional television news (NAES 2004). This shows the potential for comedy news to be a legitimate tool for political education and civic advocacy but does not prove that comedy news always will be. Comedic news hosts have the freedom to be direct in regard to their beliefs and biases, which allows them to influence their viewers more than conventional television news hosts.

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